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SUBJECT: THAILAND: UPDATE ON CONTROVERSIAL PAK MUN DAM

1. (SBU) Summary: On June 15, Poloffs visited Ubon Ratchathani province, where the controversial Pak Mun Dam is located. Representatives of an NGO alleged that the Pak Mun Dam has disrupted local fishing and farming communities, without producing anticipated levels of electricity and water. They have called for the Royal Thai Government (RTG) to keep the dam gates open all year round so that their communities can return "almost to normal." At Pak Mun Dam itself, however, a small group of demonstrators was asking that the dam gates be closed most of the year so they could grow plants and farm fish. Gates are currently scheduled to be opened four months per year, during the rainy season. Assembly of the Poor (AOP) representatives concerned with the dam alleged they are victims of government harassment and intimidation, and that fourteen of their members have been charged with "treason" for their peaceful protest activities. A reporter from the pro-government Thai Rath newspaper expressed little sympathy for the group, alleging they had threatened her in the past. End Summary.

#### PAK MUN OVERVIEW

2. (U) First approved by the Thai Cabinet in 1989, the Pak Mun Dam has been a source of controversy since its inception. Initial concerns focused on the plight of local farmers and fishermen whose lands and livelihoods would be threatened by the construction of the dam. The aggrieved villagers founded The Assembly of the Poor (AOP) in 1995. In the name of national development, the dam was built anyway, (with financial support from the World Bank) and was completed in 1994. Since then, a series of ecological setbacks, including the disappearance of dozens of fish species from waters around the dam, and the failure of the dam to realize many of its production targets have led many to question whether or not the project had been worth all the trouble. The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) continues to vociferously defend the project, and is also involved in numerous other "mega-projects" throughout Thailand, including other dams.

#### ASSEMBLY OF THE POOR

3. (U) On June 15, 2005 Poloffs met with three representatives of AOP, who complained that the Pak Mun dam had destroyed their traditional way of life, and caused the social and economic breakdown of their local communities. Although the government promised monetary compensation, AOP complained they had to "fight to get it". Each affected family was allotted a total of 90,000 baht (about \$US 2250) over a period of three years, with 30,000 baht (about \$US 750) going directly to the family and 60,000 baht (about \$US 1500) going to each family's village cooperative. AOP asserts the affected families were also promised plots of land, but only a few families ever received them.

4. (U) AOP members vehemently denied RTG allegations that overfishing by local villagers was to blame for the sudden disappearance of the fish population. They pointed out that the fish population only began decreasing once the dam was built. They noted that efforts by the Department of Fisheries to reintroduce fish into parts of the river from which they had disappeared were unsuccessful.

5. (U) Poloffs observed a \$1 million "fish ladder", which EGAT and the World Bank built after realizing the dam was impeding the natural migration of the fish. Villagers complained that the "ladder", which is supposed to aid fish in passing over the dam, has been entirely unsuccessful. (Note: A 2000 report by the World Commission on Dams reported that the fish ladder was too steep for most local species to negotiate. End Note.)

#### OPEN VS. CLOSED GATES

6. (U) With the dam already built, the main bone of contention now is to determine how many months per year to keep the dam's eight sluice gates open. AOP is fighting for the gates to remain open year-round, rendering the dam essentially useless. By keeping the gates open all year round, AOP argues that local communities could return "almost to normal." (Note: A 2001 Ubon Ratchathani University study concurred; See below. End Note.)

7. (U) At Pak Mun Dam, Poloffs encountered a rival group of

about thirty people, mostly women and children, who said they had camped out at the dam for several weeks to protest the fact that the gates were currently open. This group represented fishermen and farmers who wanted the gates to be closed most of the year, so that they could use the higher water levels around the dam for fish farming, and to grow plants. Poloffs are unaware of exactly how much support this group enjoys. Pak Mun gates are currently open on a loosely regulated 4-month per year timetable, scheduled during the annual rainy season.

#### BROKEN PROMISES

18. (U) AOP representatives told Poloffs that in 2001, the RTG allowed a team from Ubon Ratchathani University (URU) to conduct a one-year study on the economic and environmental costs and benefits of the dam. AOP asserts that the RTG agreed to abide by the team's recommendations. The URU study found that the dam's ability to generate electricity and supply water for irrigation was lower than originally projected, and grossly insufficient to justify the negative impact on fisheries, the river environment and the local community. The study also concluded that much of the ecological damage could be undone by keeping the gates of the dam open, recommending that this be done for a period of five years. Instead of abiding by the committee's recommendation, the RTG asked the National Statistics Office to conduct its own study (over a period of three days), which recommended that the dam gates be opened for about four months per year.

#### CHARGES OF TREASON AND INTIMIDATION

19. (SBU) Mrs. Lamduan Silathong, a member of AOP, told Poloffs that several years before, she had applied for a passport to attend a meeting overseas. To her surprise, authorities told her they could not issue a passport because there was a warrant out for her arrest. She went to her local police precinct, where she learned that she had been charged with "treason" several months before. Although never jailed, she and thirteen other AOP members are "out on bail", and have been told by the police that they risk being taken to task for their "crimes" if they continued with their anti-government activities.

110. (SBU) In addition to the charges of treason, AOP said their work had also been hampered by the use of the local and national media to discredit their organization and its activities. They also asserted that local leaders, including village headmen, have tried to intimidate AOP members and suppress the organization's anti-dam activities. Mrs. Lamduan felt these local officials were presumably taking orders from above.

111. (SBU) Dr. Kanokwan Manorom of Ubon Ratchatani University told Poloffs that organizations like AOP had become much weaker under the Thaksin administration because of increased government pressure. She pointed out that Thailand's Northeastern Isan region had traditionally been a hotbed of political activism. However, most of the local population was content with their improved quality of life under the Thaksin administration, leading most people to shrug off the fact that civil liberties have been decreased.

#### REPORTER REFUTES AOP ASSESSMENT

113. (SBU) Ms. Venus Iamsa'at, a newspaper reporter for the pro-government daily Thai Rath (circulation: 800,000-1,000,000), also acknowledged that AOP had slowed down its activities in recent years, though she credits their lowered profile to threats from the government to expose internal corruption by its leaders. Ms. Iamsa'at also claimed that she had been physically threatened by members of AOP in the past for writing stories critical of the movement. She felt that more and more people seemed to appear each year to collect "compensation", and that enough was enough. (COMMENT: Although AOP is well-known for its non-violent resistance efforts, it would not be surprising if certain radical elements within the organization were involved in some of the unsavory activities reported by the TR reporter. END COMMENT)

114. (U) Although the Thai Rak Thai Party of PM Thaksin Shinawatra is extremely popular with Thailand's rural poor, Mrs. Lamduan repeatedly stressed that the Thai government "doesn't understand the problems of the poor". Using somewhat leftist jargon, Ms. Somphan Khuendi argued that the "capitalist" government in Bangkok just uses money to solve all of its problems and Mrs. Lamduan said she believes the government "undervalues people", since there had never been any public hearings regarding the dam, and local people had never been consulted about the project. They pointed out that there were victims of similar government projects throughout Thailand, and that their organization now included members whose lives had been disrupted by thirty different dams all over the country.

115. (SBU) COMMENT. After fifteen years of protesting, it

appears that the Pak Mun villagers are no closer to reaching their ultimate goal of getting back their land. Although many sources (including a report published by the World Commission of Dams) agree that the Pak Mun dam has been more trouble than it's worth, it seems that RTG and EGAT are reluctant to broach dissent for fear that doing so would jeopardize future dams and "mega-development projects." As time goes by and residents leave the area, it will become more and more difficult for Pak Mun villagers to resuurect their lost communities. The overreaction of the RTG to this kind of grass-roots activism, (particularly with regard to charges of treason) is a worrying example of how this government perceives civil society groups that don,t toe the government line. END COMMENT  
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